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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000377

SIPDIS

SA/INS AND DS/OP/NEA

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SUBJECT: 179 REPORTEDLY KILLED AS MAOISTS OVERRUN DISTRICT
HQ, ARMY BARRACKS IN ACHHAM

REF: KATHMANDU 0333

Classified By: A/DCM HOZA. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

SUMMARY

11. (C) SUMMARY: Maoist insurgents attacked an airport, a district police office, and an army barracks in Achham District in western Nepal shortly after midnight February 17. Initial reports indicate 48 soldiers, at least 76 policemen, and 55 civilians, including the Chief District Officer and his wife, have been killed. The insurgents reportedly used mortars, presumably captured during the November 23 assault on the barracks in Dang, for the first time in the attack. Four policemen were killed in a separate attack in Sarlahi in the southern Terai at about the same time. The success of the attack--as well as its exceptional brutality--will raise questions about the efficacy of the state of emergency the day before Parliamentary debate on its continuation is scheduled. At the same time, the attack will turn up the heat on Prime Minister Deuba, already under fire from intra-party rivals eager for an opportunity to press his resignation. End summary.

ACHHAM ATTACKED

12. (SBU) At about midnight February 17 a large contingent of Maoists (initially estimated at 1,500; subsequent Army estimates have ranged as high as 3,000) overran the District Police Office in the District Headquarters of Mangalsen, Achham in western Nepal (approximately 760 km from Kathmandu), killing about 49 policemen and injuring more than 120. There were some reports that the Maoists may have used mortars, stolen during the November 23 attack on the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) barracks in Dang, in the attack. The district police office and the District Administration Office were burned down. Also killed in the attack was the Chief District Officer, the senior civil servant with authority for the district, and his wife, the local head of the National Investigation Department (Nepal's intelligence service), and 52 other civilians in the district. Communications with the District HQ were lost at about 3:00 a.m.; fighting reportedly continued until about 6:00 a.m. Achham Jail was reportedly also attacked and all inmates released. Additional reports indicate that the local bank was robbed and the dollar equivalent of more than USD 260,000 taken.

13. (SBU) The insurgents also attacked a 57-man RNA platoon based at Mangalsen, killing at least 48 soldiers. Two soldiers survived the attack and the remaining seven have been reported missing.

14. (SBU) At about the same time the attack was launched on the District Headquarters, insurgents also hit police guarding the small airstrip at Sanphebagar, also in Achham. Initial casualty estimates stand at 27 police killed. The airport tower, several office buildings and the airport police barracks were destroyed. RNA reinforcements helicoptered to the site were unable to land at the airstrip because of improvised explosive devices scattered around the airfield; soldiers instead rappelled down to the field.

15. (SBU) RNA reinforcements began reaching the sites by helicopter by late morning Feb. 17 and conducted search operations until about 6:00 p.m. There have been no reports of the number of weapons possibly recovered or suspects arrested as a result of these operations.

SARLAHI ATTACK

16. (U) Also at about midnight Feb. 17, insurgents attacked a 19-man police post at Lalbandhi, Sarlahi District, in the southern Terai, killing four policemen. One Maoist was also killed in the attack. Police have so far recovered only two rifles stolen from the site; the number of weapons still missing is unknown.

PM UNDER PRESSURE

17. (C) Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was out of Kathmandu at the time of the attacks on a visit to Dharan in eastern Nepal. He returned by late afternoon Feb. 17 and called an emergency Cabinet meeting. Meanwhile, politicians from the PM's Nepali Congress Party were reportedly meeting throughout the day to discuss the attack--and its implications for Deuba's longevity as PM. The Prime Minister is expected to address the nation over local television later in the evening of Feb. 17.

COMMENT

18. (C) The attacks in Achham are unprecedented in scale, intensity, and, if initial casualty estimates prove accurate, bloodshed, indicating that the Maoists, who on Feb. 13 celebrated the seven-year anniversary of an insurgency that has already killed more than 2,000 Nepalis, are far from ready to give up. Just as Parliament prepares to debate ratification of a national emergency intended to clamp down on the insurgents, the Maoists demonstrated they have moved beyond their conventional tactics of knocking off isolated, under-manned police posts or terrorizing local teachers and village leaders. Instead, they have shown they can effectively disable an entire district administration, wiping out a whole unit of civilian government authority and decimating the beefed-up security forces sent to safeguard it. The 55-person civilian body count, if accurate, is especially alarming. Maoists have killed hundreds of civilians since the beginning of the insurgency, but have typically targeted individuals--usually local leaders or mainstream party activists--instead of engaging in mass, apparently indiscriminate attacks.

19. (C) Comment continued: February typically sees heightened insurgent activity, but the Achham attacks may have been timed to send PM Deuba and his government a message as Parliament prepares Feb. 18 to debate ratification of the three-month-old state of emergency and its continuation for an additional three months (Reftel). The magnitude of the bloodshed will put heightened pressure on Deuba, already under attack from rivals within his own Nepali Congress Party, led by former PM G.P. Koirala, for what they charge is his failure to contain the insurgency and restore civil order. The viciousness of the attacks will probably ensure that the emergency will be extended for at least another three months; what they will do to Deuba's own longevity is less certain. Koirala and his cronies likely do not have the votes within the party to oust Deuba (Reftel), but this may not prevent them from trying. While the Maoists may have launched the attacks to prove the ineffectiveness of the emergency, Koirala et al may see in this national tragedy a similar chance to try to prove Deuba's ineffectiveness as a leader. End comment.

MALINOWSKI